

Two for the Knowledge Goal of Inquiry

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Abstract

This paper provides two arguments in favour of the thesis that knowledge, rather than some epistemic standing falling short of knowledge such as true belief, justified belief or justified true belief, is the goal of inquiry. First, only the knowledge goal is compatible with a satisfactory account of when agents are released from various commitments they may have to reaching the goal of inquiry. And, second, only the knowledge goal can make proper sense of progress in inquiry.

1 Introduction

Suppose you ask yourself whether your father's record collection includes a certain recording of *The Trout* and venture to find out. At that time, you embark on an *inquiry* into whether your father owns the relevant recording. Your inquiry is a project with a specific goal: *finding out* whether your father owns the recording. This fact about your inquiry generalises: inquiry is a goal-directed enterprise. A specific inquiry can be individuated by the question it aims to answer and by who aims to answer the question. Your inquiry into whether your father owns the recording differs from your inquiry into how many records your father owns because different questions are being asked. Your inquiry into whether your father owns the recording differs from my inquiry into whether he does because different people are inquiring.

The goal of inquiry into a given question by an agent, α , can be characterised, neutrally, as α 's *having the answer to that question*. I will

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here focus only on inquiries into whether-questions and characterise the goal of inquiry into whether ϕ by α as α 's having the answer to the question whether ϕ .

At the same time, there are various substantive epistemological theses concerning the goal of inquiry. These can be understood as competing accounts of what it takes for an agent to have the answer to a whether-question. The most prominent candidates include:

K-GOAL. α has the answer to the question whether ϕ at time t if and only if, at t , α *knows* whether ϕ .¹

TB-GOAL. α has the answer to the question whether ϕ at time t if and only if, at t , α *truly believes* whether ϕ .²

JB-GOAL. α has the answer to the question whether ϕ at time t if and only if, at t , α *justifiably believes* whether ϕ .³

JTB-GOAL. α has the answer to the question whether ϕ at time t if and only if, at t , α *justifiably and truly believes* whether ϕ .⁴

In what follows I will provide some evidence favouring K-GOAL over the three competitors just mentioned. In order to achieve this I will, first, outline a general framework for goal-directed projects and provide support for a number of crucial theses about such projects (§2). I will then apply the framework to inquiry projects (§3) and argue that K-GOAL has an edge over its three abovementioned rivals (§4).

2 Projects

I will start with some basic concepts. Where ψ is any goal-directed project, Ω its goal, α any agent and t any time:

¹ Champions of K-GOAL include Timothy Williamson [2000] and Alan Millar [in 2010].

² TB-GOAL has been defended for instance by Jonathan Kvanvig [2003] and Michael Lynch [2005].

³ Donald Davidson [2005], Richard Rorty [1995, 2000] and Richard Feldman [2002] are among the most prominent advocates of JB-GOAL.

⁴ I am not sure whether this view actually has any defenders. The view that justified true belief rather than knowledge is of central epistemic value is often attributed to Mark Kaplan [1985] (e.g. in Pritchard and Turri 2011). Since Kaplan's argument against the value of knowledge concerns the role of knowledge in inquiry, Kaplan might be sympathetic to this view.

ACCOMPLISHMENT. ψ is *accomplished* by α at t if and only if, at t , α has reached Ω .

For instance, R_1 has accomplished his project of running a marathon if and only if he has run the distance (i.e. 42.195 kilometres).

COMPLETION. ψ is *completed* for α at t if and only if, at t , α believes that he has accomplished ψ .

For instance, R_1 's project of running a marathon is completed for him if and only if he believes that he has run the distance.

ONGOINGNESS. ψ is *ongoing* for α at t if and only if, at t , α is committed to accomplishing ψ .

For instance, R_1 's marathon project is ongoing for him just in case he is committed to running the distance.

There are a number of types of commitment one may have towards accomplishing an ongoing project. The nature of the commitment depends on how it arises. For instance, R_1 may have the desire to run a marathon and thereupon form the intention to do so. In this case, I will say that R_1 has a *practical* commitment to running a marathon. R_1 may also have promised someone to run a marathon. In this case, R_1 has a *moral* commitment to running a marathon. Or R_1 may have been contracted to run a marathon in which case his commitment will be *contractual*. Other forms of commitment are conceivable. What's more, an agent may simultaneously have various different kinds of commitment towards accomplishing a project. Besides having originally formed an intention to run a marathon out of a desire to do, R_1 may now have promised and signed a contract that he would do so. In this case, R_1 is practically, morally and contractually committed to running a marathon.

One way in which an agent can be released from any commitment he has towards accomplishing a certain project is by accomplishing the project. This gives us a crucial thesis:

COMMITMENT RELEASE. If α has accomplished ψ at t , then, at t , α is released from all commitments towards accomplishing ψ .

For instance, when R_1 has made the distance, he will be released from his practical, moral and contractual commitments to running a marathon.

Accomplishing a project is not the only way of being released from a commitment to its accomplishment. R_1 may lose interest and

as a result drop his intention to run a marathon. This will release him from his practical commitment. Of course, even when R_1 has lost interest, he may still be bound by his promise or the contract he entered. In order to be released from the corresponding moral and contractual commitments, R_1 may need the cooperation of, here, the person he made the promise to and the other party to the contract.⁵

It may be worth noting that an agent may have accomplished a given project even when it is not completed for him. Suppose the officials of a marathon race miscalculate the distance and, as a result, misplace the finish line at 43 kilometres. R_1 will have accomplished his marathon project 805 metres before the finish line. However, when he does not know about the mistake, his project remains incomplete for him for another 805 metres. While he is running that distance, R_1 will believe that he is still bound by his intention, promise, contract, etc. and that he still has to run until he has crossed the finish line.

Often projects admit of varying degrees of *progress* towards accomplishment. Progress here is a function of times and distances from accomplishment. α has made progress on ψ between t_i and t_j if and only if, at t_j , α is closer to accomplishing ψ than at t_i . When R_1 is about to cross the finish line he has made progress on his marathon project compared to when he crossed the start line because he is now closer to accomplishing the project.

It is not hard to see that this definition of progress yields the following thesis about comparative progress:

COMPARATIVE PROGRESS. If, at t_i , α and β are equidistant from accomplishing ψ and α but not β makes progress towards accomplishing ψ between t_i and t_j , then β has not accomplished ψ at t_j unless α has.

When R_1 and R_2 are at a certain time head to head in the race and R_2 pauses while R_1 continues to run, R_2 can't have accomplished the marathon project unless R_1 has.

3 Inquiry

The above framework for goal-directed projects can easily be applied to various projects of inquiry. The project of inquiry into whether ϕ is

⁵ In addition, one may have a moral commitment to fulfil other commitments, such as contractual ones, that one has taken on. In that case, one won't be released from one's moral commitment unless one has been released from one's contractual commitment. The same may hold for other types of commitments.

ongoing for agent α at t if and only if, at t , α is committed to having the answer to the question whether ϕ , accomplished at t if and only if, at t , α has the answer, and completed at t if and only if, at t , α believes that he has the answer.

I will momentarily develop a couple of problems for competitors to K-GOAL. Before moving on to the relevant arguments, however, I would like make three preliminary points. The first one concerns the notion of justified belief at issue in JB-GOAL and JTB-GOAL. For the purposes of this paper, I will work with the following popular characterisation of this notion:

JUSTIFIED BELIEF. One's belief that ϕ is justified if and only if, given one's belief that ϕ is additionally true and ungettiered, it qualifies as knowledge that ϕ .

Second, the project of inquiry into whether ϕ is completed for α at t if and only if, at t , α believes whether ϕ . After all, any agent capable of having a commitment towards accomplishing this project must have the concept of question and answer as well as the concepts needed to formulate the question whether ϕ . Any agent so equipped who believes that ϕ will also believe that he has the answer to the question whether ϕ and any agent so equipped who believes that not- ϕ will also believe that he has the answer to the question whether ϕ . Moreover any agent who believes that he has the answer to the question whether ϕ will also either believe that ϕ or else believe that not- ϕ (but not both). Thus belief whether ϕ completes inquiry into whether ϕ . Since all four competing accounts of the goal of inquiry endorse a belief condition on accomplishment of inquiry, for the purposes of this paper, we get the following thesis:

COMPLETION REQUIREMENT. α has accomplished inquiry into whether ϕ at t only if, at t , α has completed inquiry into whether ϕ .⁶

Third, concerning inquiry, distance from accomplishment supervenes on epistemic and doxastic position towards the answer as well as the answer's truth value and the agent's practical position. This gives us:

DUPLICATES. If α and β are worldmates and share the same epistemic, doxastic and practical position towards ϕ , they are equidistant from accomplishing inquiry into whether ϕ .

⁶ If you disagree with the argument for COMPLETION REQUIREMENT, I'd like to invite you to interpret the above passage as spelling out a number of idealisations under which it can be said to hold.

NO PROGRESS. If α 's epistemic, doxastic and practical position towards ϕ does not change between t_i and t_j , then α makes no progress on his inquiry into whether ϕ .

4 Two for K-Goal

4.1 Commitment Release

Now consider the following case:

Detective 1. D_1 is a private detective who has been hired for one month to find out whether someone in X 's office is the murderer of X 's wife, Y . D_1 first investigates suspect S , one of X 's colleagues, who has a particularly strong motive for the deed. Fortunately for D_1 , S credibly admits to having committed the crime upon questioning and even signs a confession in writing. On the basis of this evidence, D_1 comes to believe that someone in X 's office has murdered Y , thereby completing his inquiry. With the inquiry completed on the first day, D_1 packs his bags, including the confession, gets on the next flight to the Caribbean where he intends to take a holiday for the rest of the month. Meanwhile, it becomes widely known that S 's claim to have had murdered Y is false. D_1 , who is currently sipping cocktails in the sun is unaware of the news about S 's statement.

Notice that D_1 's belief that someone in X 's office did the deed was formed on the basis of excellent evidence, evidence that is strong enough to turn an ungettiered true belief into knowledge: S 's strong motive and credible confession. By JUSTIFIED BELIEF, then, D_1 's belief is justified. In addition, we may assume that it is true: someone in X 's office did indeed murder Y . It is just that it wasn't S . D_1 satisfies all of TB-GOAL, JB-GOAL and JTB-GOAL. By COMMITMENT RELEASE, all of the above predict that D_1 is released from all commitments towards finding out whether someone in X 's office murdered Y .

Now here is the sixty-four thousand dollar question: Is this prediction correct? In particular, is D_1 released from his *contractual* commitment to find out whether someone in X 's office murdered Y ? The answer to this question is very plausibly 'no'. D_1 may have an excellent *excuse* for not working on the case. At the same time, as far as his contract is concerned, what D_1 ought to be doing is work on the case rather than sit on the beach in the Caribbean. If this isn't immediately obvious, put yourself in the shoes of D_1 's employer and suppose you have found out about D_1 's situation. While you might

concede that D_1 has an excuse for no longer working on the case, you could rightly insist that, as far as the contract is concerned, what D_1 ought to be doing is work on the case rather than sip cocktails on some beach in the Caribbean. What's more, you may rightly take steps to get him back to work, to fulfil his contract. Notice that when you do this, there is no need to negotiate a new contract with D_1 . All you need to do is remind him of the old contract, which is still binding. None of this would make any sense if D_1 had been released from his contractual commitment.⁷

Thus, TB-GOAL, JB-GOAL and JTB-GOAL's prediction that D_1 is released from all commitments towards finding out whether someone in X 's office murdered Y is mistaken. In contrast, K-GOAL does not make a mistaken prediction here. After all, Detective 1 is a standard Gettier case and so D_1 's belief falls short of knowledge. According to K-GOAL, then, D_1 falls short of accomplishing the relevant inquiry project and is therefore not released from his commitments to its accomplishment.

4.2 Progress

Let's again start with some cases:

Detective 2. D_2 is inquiring into whether the murderer of Z works for a certain company C . D_2 first investigates suspect S , an employee at C , who has a particularly strong motive for the deed. Fortunately for D_2 , S credibly admits to having committed the crime upon questioning and even signs a confession in writing. On the basis of this information, at t_1 , D_2 comes to believe P = that someone in X 's office has murdered Z , thereby completing his inquiry. D_2 gets on the next flight to the Caribbean, where he is currently (t_2) sipping cocktails in the sun.

Detective 3. D_3 is inquiring into whether the murder of Z works for a certain company C . D_3 first investigates suspect S , an employee of C , who has a particularly strong motive for the deed. Fortunately

⁷ Compare also: You have contracted a moving company to move all your furniture from your old address to the new one. So long as the company has moved only part of your furniture, they have not fulfilled the contract. As far as the contract is concerned, they ought to continue working on moving your furniture rather than call it an early day, say. You may also rightly take steps to get them back to work, without first having to negotiate a new contract. This is so even if they have an excellent excuse for having called it a day, say because they justifiably believe that they have already moved all your furniture.

for D_3 , S credibly admits to having committed the crime upon questioning and even signs a confession in writing. On the basis of this information, at t_1 , D_3 comes to believe P = that someone in X 's office has murdered Z , thereby completing his inquiry. However, at t_2 , D_3 discovers that S 's confession was false. S in fact had a watertight alibi for the time of the crime and was trying to protect the perpetrator.

Now here is the crucial claim: *D_3 has made progress on his inquiry project between t_1 and t_2 .* By way of support for this claim notice, first, that, at t_2 , D_3 has discovered that a certain piece of evidence that, at t_1 , appears to support P is misleading. Second, at t_2 , D_3 can tick one person off the list of suspects he was not not able to tick off at t_1 .

The problem for all of TB-GOAL, JB-GOAL and JTB-GOAL is that they are unable to accommodate the crucial claim. Here is why:

1. D_3 has made progress on his inquiry into whether P between t_1 and t_2 . [Crucial claim]
2. At t_1 , D_2 and D_3 are in the same epistemic, practical and doxastic position towards P and they are worldmates. [Premise]
3. At t_1 , D_2 and D_3 are equidistant from accomplishing the project. [2, DUPLICATES]
4. D_2 's epistemic, practical and doxastic position towards the issue remains unchanged between t_1 and t_2 . [Premise]
5. D_2 does not make progress on the inquiry project between t_1 and t_2 . [4, NO PROGRESS]
6. At t_2 , D_3 does not have a belief whether P . [Premise]
7. At t_2 , D_3 has not accomplished the project. [6, COMPLETION REQUIREMENT]
8. D_2 has not accomplished the project at t_2 . [1, 3, 5, 7, COMPARATIVE PROGRESS]

It is easy to see that TB-GOAL, JB-GOAL and JTB-GOAL are all incompatible with [8]. After all, D_2 's belief in P is again based on excellent evidence, evidence strong enough to turn an ungettiered true belief into knowledge: S 's strong motive and credible confession. By JUSTIFIED BELIEF, then, D_2 's belief is justified. We may also assume that his belief is true: Someone working for C did the deed—it's just that it wasn't not S . Thus, according to TB-GOAL, JB-GOAL and JTB-GOAL,

at t_2 , D_2 has accomplished inquiry into whether P . None of the three views is compatible the plausible crucial claim.

In contrast, K-GOAL once again avoids the problem. Since knowledge requires an anti-Gettier condition and since D_2 's belief at t_2 is gettiered (as, by the way, are D_2 and D_3 's beliefs at t_1), it does not qualify as knowledge. For that reason, as opposed to TB-GOAL, JB-GOAL and JTB-GOAL, K-GOAL does not predict that, at t_2 , D_2 has accomplished the inquiry project. K-GOAL is thus compatible with the crucial claim, that D_3 makes progress on the question whether P between t_1 and t_2 . In fact, to the extent that it is plausible that D_3 's subsequent discoveries and investigations get him closer to knowledge whether P , K-GOAL predicts that D_3 has made progress on the project.

5 Conclusion

The main ambition of this paper was to provide support for K-GOAL. In order to achieve this I have provided reason to think that K-GOAL is preferable to its most promising competitors, TB-GOAL, JB-GOAL and JTB-GOAL on two counts: first, only K-GOAL makes the correct predictions about when agents are released from commitments to inquiry projects in cases like Detective 1 and, second, only K-GOAL is compatible with a plausible thesis about progress in inquiry in cases like Detective 2 and 3.⁸

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